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SUBJECT: HONG KONG ACADEMIC FREEDOM: SAY WHAT YOU WANT,
BUT BEIJING IS LISTENING

REF: (A) HONG KONG 1958 (B) HONG KONG 483

Classified By: E/P Section Chief Martin Murphy for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary: While Hong Kong has had its post-handover academic openness tested in two high-profile cases, the forces of censorship definitively lost. Local professors agree Hong Kong remains an open forum for the exchange of ideas. One of our contacts felt Hong Kong's future academic freedom could be taken for granted. Some professors, however, complained that vocal critics of the PRC in Hong Kong faced a certain degree of ostracism on the Mainland, including finding themselves disinclined to conferences or lectures. By the same token, cooperative professors may be rewarded with expanded access and research activities. End summary.

12. (C) We met with four local professors, all of whom are long-term residents of Hong Kong. In addition, all have had extensive contact with Mainland universities, researchers, or graduate students. Professor Fu Hualing, head of the law faculty at the University of Hong Kong (HKU), monitors rule of law issues on the Mainland. Professor John Burns is a 30-year veteran of HKU's Department of Politics and Public Administration. Professor Joseph Yu-shek Cheng teaches political science at the City University of Hong Kong and is also directly involved in Hong Kong politics. He sits on the Executive Committee of the pan-democratic Civic Party. Professor Anthony Spire teaches in the Department of Sociology at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) and serves as Associate Director of the Centre for Civil Society Studies, where he researches the development of NGOs on the Mainland.

Hong Kong: Censors Censured

13. (C) Twelve years after the handover, Hong Kong remained "robust" in the area of academic freedom, commented Burns, who has sat on panels to review grant funding proposals and seen the range of ideas put forward in Hong Kong. While professors were not advocating for the Falun Gong, Tibetan independence, or Taiwanese statehood, it was because these ideas get no traction, rather than because they were off limits. There was a "gargantuan gap" between Hong Kong and the Mainland in terms of freedom to research and publish, contended Burns. Fu agreed that there had been "no significant change" on Hong Kong campuses since 1997. Only City U's Cheng sounded a warning, arguing that self-censorship in both the media and academia on Hong Kong issues was gradually increasing. (Comment: The Hong Kong Journalist Association has similarly told us that local media tended to defer to government spokespeople in order to retain access and good relations. End comment.)

14. (C) In support of his contention, Burns cited two failed

attempts at censorship since the handover. In the first, then-Secretary for Education Fanny Law (a political appointee) and Permanent Secretary for Education Arthur Lee (a civil servant) were accused of telling the head of the Hong Kong Institute of Education (HKIEd) to tone down criticism of the government's education policy by firing the most fervent critics. HKIEd instead blew the whistle, and after legal proceedings, Lee was forced to resign. Second, the former vice-chancellor of HKU, Cheung Yiu-chung, was accused of trying to muzzle pollster Robert Chung because his data showed the then-Chief Executive (CE) Tung Chee-hwa to be unpopular in July 2000. The scandal was exposed in televised hearings, and Cheung was subsequently forced to resign.

Beijing: Making a List, Checking it Twice

15. (C) While Hong Kong society may be resistant to outright moves to censorship, City U's Cheng sees a creeping trend towards self-censorship so as not to provoke Beijing. Academics friendly to the PRC have no trouble getting invitations to the Mainland for research, conferences, or lectures, while critics can find themselves unwelcome. Both Cheng and HKU's Fu fell into this camp. Fu told us his name had been struck off Mainland invite lists several times. Although the official explanation was to make room for non-academics, Fu believed he was being "punished" for his dissenting views on one-party rule and his work with legal advocacy groups. Spires reported no difficulties personally, but insisted that it was now common sense in Hong Kong that, "if you want to do anything on the Mainland, you need to

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practice self-censorship." He agreed with Cheng and Fu that academics who were brazen Party bashers got fewer invites. Only Burns dismissed the complaints against Beijing as overstated and saw no evidence that a blanket of self-censorship was creeping over Hong Kong.

16. (C) In spite of the occasional snub from Beijing, none of the professors knew of any Hong Kong academic who had been barred entirely from entering the PRC. They contrasted this with a decision by Macau to deny entry to respected HKU Law School Dean Johannes Chan during Macau's deliberations over Article 23 legislation (ref B). Moreover, Fu to date has had no problems meeting with Mainland lawyers in the field, many of whom suffer regular harassment by authorities. As a naturalized Canadian citizen, however, Fu was concerned that he might someday have trouble renewing his Chinese visa. Likewise, Spires, who researches civil society development in China, was granted a one-year multiple-entry "F" business visa to continue his research on the Mainland. For his part, even Cheng conceded that there were no "hard sanctions" against those who took a firmly anti-government stance in Hong Kong.
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